1 SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR SELECTING A

2 VACATION DESTINATION

3

4 BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

5

6 1. Field of the Invention

7 This invention relates broadly to a system and method for

8 data processing. More particularly, this invention relates to an

9 interactive system and method to facilitate the selection of a

10 vacation destination and accommodation by a consumer.

11

12 2. State of the Art

13 There are a number of options available to a consumer over

14 the Internet to provide the consumer assistance in certain aspects

15 of vacation (or holiday) planning. Some sites offer essays on

16 numerous destinations. Wading through the available materials

17 turns vacation planning into a research project. At the other

18 extreme are online booking agent sites which locate airfares and

19 hotels for a stated destination and then permit the consumer to

20 book reservations. These online booking sites provide minimal

21 assistance for the consumer who does not know where he or she

22 wants to vacation or what kind of vacation he or she wants to

23 have. Between the extremes exist myriad other sites which provide

24 a range of services.

25

1   For example, several 'personal advisor' sites, e.g.,

2   www.allexperts.com and www.egulliver.com, provide specialists who

3   correspond with consumers via email to provide suggestions on

4   vacation destinations. The specialists are typically freelance

5   travel consultants who help plan and arrange the travel. However,

6   the response time is relatively slow and the recommendation is

7   only as good as the individual specialist.

8

9   Other sites, e.g., www.personalogic.com, utilize a structured

10   questionnaire in which consumers rate their preferences (e.g.,

11   from 'strong' to 'weak') on a number of vacation criteria. One of

12   the preferences is to what general geographical destination the

13   consumer wants to travel. The preferences are then extrapolated

14   into recommendations. This analytical methodology provides

15   unconvincing results and requires that the user already have an

16   idea of to where he or she wants to travel.

17

18   Another category of sites are 'activity led' sites. These

19   sites specialize in vacation packages or accommodations suited to

20   one type of activity, such as golfing (e.g., www.golf-travel.com)

21   or diving (e.g., www.diveguide.com). The sites generally either

22   list their 'best' ranked resorts in which to perform the activity,

23   or provide information on accommodations. Generally, no guidance

24   is provided on which is the best vacation spot for any particular

25   consumer. In addition, for those consumers who have not yet

1 discovered that they would like a vacation centered around a

2 particular activity, the sites do not provide any assistance;

3 i.e., the web site will likely only be accessed once the consumer

4 has determined on his or her own that he or she wishes to engage

5 in a particular activity.

6

7   Directory sites, e.g., www.brochurebank.com and

8 www.holidaywizard.co.uk, permit consumers to order print brochures

9 from a range of travel operators. The brochures are then mailed

10 to the consumer. While these sites permit a consumer access to

11 information, they present several major limitations. First, no

12 assistance is provided in requesting brochures. Second, there is

13 a limitation on the number of brochures which can be requested.

14 Third, there is a relatively large lag time for receipt of the

15 brochures. Fourth, the consumer still has to sift through the

16 information in the brochures and make a determination as to where

17 he or she wants to travel.

18

19   Other sites, e.g., www.expedia.com and

20 www.holidayswithease.co.uk., allow consumers to search for

21 vacation packages, but are not suitable for consumers who have not

22 yet determined to where they would like to travel; and as

23 discussed above, all other sites require that the consumer know

24 the general region in which he or she would like to travel or have

25 a selected activity prior to choosing a destination. There is no

1 site which interactively guides a consumer who does not generally

2 know to where he or she wants to travel and what he or she want to

3 do while on vacation.

4

5 SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

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7 It is therefore an object of the invention to provide an

8 interactive system which, based on interactive engagement with a

9 consumer, selects a vacation destination for a consumer.

10

11 It is also an object of the invention to provide a method for

12 interacting with a consumer and guiding a consumer in choosing

13 vacation destinations.

14

15 It is another object of the invention to provide interactive

16 vacation destination selection systems and methods which do not

17 require the consumer to have prior knowledge of where he or she

18 wishes to travel.

19

20 It is still another object of the invention to provide an

21 interactive vacation destination selection system and method which

22 inquire of the consumer a 'type of vacation' which the consumer

23 desires.

24

1   It is a further object of the invention to provide an

2   interactive vacation destination selection system and method,

3   which based on the results of the 'type of vacation' inquiry,

4   presents a plurality of categories each having associated

5   attributes, the selection of the attributes within each category

6   resulting in a selected vacation destination, as well as optional

7   accommodations meeting the needs and wants of the consumer.

8

9   It is an additional object of the invention to provide an

10   interactive vacation destination selection system in which the

11   attributes are represented by images, and the images, in total,

12   operate to summarize the consumer's desired vacation.

13

14   In accord with these objects, which will be discussed in

15   detail below, an interactive vacation destination selection system

16   is provided which guides a consumer in choosing where the consumer

17   wants to travel. The vacation destination selection system

18   operates through a back end and a front end. The back end

19   identifies criteria which may be important to a consumer,

20   categorizes the criteria, and assigns images to the criteria. In

21   addition, the back end collects data (or attributes) on various

22   vacation destinations serviced by the system and assigns the

23   attributes to the appropriate criteria. The front end to the

24   system assesses what a consumer wants in his or her vacation

25   destination, identifies vacation destinations having the

1 attributes that satisfy those wants, and then displays comparative

2 data on those vacation destinations.

3

4   The consumer inputs his or her personal data (e.g., number of

5 travelers, ages of travelers, when the consumer wants to travel,

6 the length of the vacation, the distance from home the consumer is

7 willing to travel, and a budget range), as well as a vacation

8 category; that is, the vacation defined in broad terms (e.g.,

9 cruise, sun and beach, activity led, countryside, safari, etc.)

10 into the front end of the system. The front end then displays to

11 the user criteria related to the category and selected from the

12 back end data. Each criterion is preferably represented by an

13 image, and the consumer is able to select one or more of the

14 images to identify the consumer's criteria. The images selected

15 are displayed for the user and together provide a visual

16 representation of the type of vacation being sought by the user.

17 The system compares the consumer's input personal data and

18 selected vacation category, as well as criteria related to that

19 category, with the attributes of all vacation destinations in the

20 back end of the system. The system then identifies vacation

21 destinations which satisfy the consumer's vacation wants (based on

22 the selected criteria) and provides to the consumer a detailed

23 objective comparison of vacation destinations having attributes

24 which meet the consumer's selected criteria. It will be

25 appreciated that the system is capable of determining a suitable

- 6 -

1 vacation destination for a consumer even without being provided

2 information as to where the consumer wants to travel.

3

4 Additional objects and advantages of the invention will

5 become apparent to those skilled in the art upon reference to the

6 detailed description taken in conjunction with the provided

7 figures.

8

9 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

10

11 Fig. 1 is a schematic of the interactive vacation destination

12 selection system according to the invention;

13

14 Fig. 2A through 2D together constitute a flow chart

15 illustrating the method of operation of the vacation destination

16 selection system of the invention; and

17

18 Figs. 3 through 19 are exemplar 'screen shots' of the front

19 end interface of the vacation destination selection system.

20

21 DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

22

23 Turning now to Fig. 1, according to the invention, a vacation

24 (or holiday) destination selection system 10 includes a central

25 computer 12 operating a back end data module 14 and a front end

1   interface module 16. The back end module may be implemented as a

2   database of criteria and attributes, as described below, and the

3   front end module may be implemented as a database of HTML

4   (hypertext markup language) files and associated image files

5   which, as also described below, facilitate user interaction with

6   the system. The central computer 12 is in communication with one

7   or more user terminals 18 (e.g., home computers) via the Internet

8   or other computer network. That is, the central computer is

9   preferably a server 12, and the terminals 18 are preferably nodes

10   on the network. The terminals 18 include a display 20 which

11   permits a consumer (user) to view the HTML and image files of the

12   front end module 16 of a remotely located central computer 12, and

13   an input device 22 (e.g., a keyboard, mouse, and/or microphone)

14   which permits the consumer the provide input to the computer 12.

15

16   The back end module 14 includes criteria, described in more

17   detail below, which may be important to a consumer in selecting a

18   vacation destination, and which are organized into categories

19   appropriate for the type of vacation and general location

20   selected. Exemplar categories for a beach vacation include:

21   'destinations', 'local area', 'accommodations', 'important for

22   kids', 'things to do', and 'individual needs', which are described

23   in more detail below.

24

1   In addition, data (or attributes) collected on various

2   vacation destinations and accommodations serviced by the system

3   are stored in the back end module and assigned to the appropriate

4   criteria. Attribute includes, with respect to particular

5   destinations and accommodations, the cost, the particular

6   activities offered, features of the locality, food options, etc.

7   For example, if a particular modern hotel located on the beach has

8   both a luxury and standard rooms and a pool, and is located just

9   outside a historic village and also has access to various water

10   sports including sailing and snorkeling, the hotel will be linked

11   with the relevant criteria in the relevant categories:

12   'accommodations': 'hotel', 'modern', 'on the beach',

13   'luxury', 'standard', 'pool';

14   'local area': 'historic';

15   'things to do': 'sailing', 'snorkeling'.

16

17   According to a preferred aspect of the invention, image files

18   are also assigned to each of the criterion within a category. The

19   associated image file may change based upon a consumer's selection

20   of other criteria. The front and back end modules of the system

21   assess what a consumer wants in his or her vacation destination

22   (based on the consumer's input at the terminal), identifies

23   vacation destinations and accommodations having the attributes

24   that satisfy those wants, and then displays on the terminal

1 comparative data on those vacation destinations and accommodations.

2

3   The front end interface module 16 provides an interactive

4 interface which guides the consumer through the selection of

5 criteria desired for a vacation. Then, as described in more

6 detail below, once the criteria have been selected by the

7 consumer, destinations and accommodation having attributes which

8 best meet the wants of the consumer are presented to the consumer

9 for final review by the consumer.

10

11   Referring to Fig. 2A, the front end module first requests

12 that the consumer supply information as to who will be traveling;

13 i.e., who (the name of the consumer inputting the requested

14 information) at 100 and the number of travelers and their age

15 ranges (the number of adults, the number of teenagers, the number

16 of children, the number of infants) at 104. The consumer responds

17 by entering the requested information at 102 and 106. The

18 consumer is also requested to input when he or she wants to travel

19 at 108 (and responds with a month and year at 110), for how long

20 at 112 (and responds by selection of a time period 1-7 days, 10-14

21 days, etc. at 114), how far away at 116 (and responds with 'this

22 continent' or 'far away' at 118), and a budget range at 120 (and

23 responds with a range of per person costs of up to $500, $500-

24 $1000, $1000-$1500, $1500-$2000, $2000-$2500, and greater than

1    $2500 at 122). Each of the consumer responses 110, 114, 118, 122

2   is stored by the computer.

3

4   Referring to Fig. 2B, the front end module additionally

5   requests the consumer to provide at 124 an indication of the

6   general type of vacation that the consumer is seeking, e.g.,

7   cruise, sun and beach, activity led, countryside, safari,

8   exploration tour, multiple locations, etc. The consumer's

9   response to the request is provided at 126 and then stored. All

10   the above responses, other than the consumer name at 102, are

11   preferably input by the consumer via selection of appropriate

12   check boxes or selection of items from pull down lists.

13

14   Then, referring now to Figs. 2B and 3, the front end

15   preferably, though optionally, presents one or more questions to

16   focus the consumer on what he or she wants to achieve on the

17   vacation. A first question 128 presented at 130 is preferably

18   "How do you want to feel on your vacation?". The consumer enters

19   at 132 his or her typed answer, in their own words, in a text box

20   134. An 'ideas button' 136 is also provided to give the consumer

21   the option at 140 to view previously stored responses of others in

22   order to help formulate the consumer's own answer. The consumer

23   may at 142 select one of the previously stored responses as his or

24   her own answer as an alternative to typing his or her own

25   response. After the user has entered or selected his or her

1 answer, a 'done' button 144 is activated to store at 146 the

2 answer. Referring to Figs. 2B and 4, a second question 148 "What

3 do you want your overwhelming memory to be?" is presented at 150.

4 The consumer may enter his or her own answer at 152 in a text box

5 154, or view, at 156, and select at 158 the answer of another.

6 The answer is then stored at 160. The stored answers are used in

7 a postcard file, described below, and for access by others seeking

8 to formulate their own responses.

9

10 Based upon the consumer's previous responses, criteria

11 (organized in categories) designed to elicit more particular

12 information from the consumer are prepared for presentation to the

13 user. Referring now to Fig. 2B, if any one or more categories

14 from the standard category set ('destination', 'local area',

15 'accommodations', 'important for kids', 'things to do' and

16 'individual needs') are not appropriate in view of the previous

17 responses by the consumer, the category of criteria may be

18 eliminated at 162. For example, if no children are traveling, the

19 'important for kids' category is preferably eliminated for that

20 consumer. Then, referring to Figs. 2C and 5, based on the type of

21 vacation earlier selected by the consumer (e.g., 'beach and sun')

22 and the age of the travelers (e.g., adults and children), the

23 system displays at 164 on the terminal the remaining categories

24 166a, 166b, 166c, 166d, 166e, 166f from the standard category set

1 such that the consumer may provide information in order to most

2 appropriately select a vacation destination.

3

4   The consumer may select any of the categories 166a-f to

5 provide information in any order. Selection at 168 of any of the

6 categories 166a-f brings up appropriate criteria by which the

7 consumer can more particularly define what he or she wants to

8 experience on the vacation. Referring to Fig. 6, preferably

9 twelve criteria 170 and associated image files 172 are displayed

10 in a two-dimensional array at 174 for each category. While each

11 criteria has an associated image file, the image files do not

12 refer to particular destinations, accommodations, etc., but rather

13 are intended to convey a feeling which the consumer is trying to

14 achieve on the vacation by selection of the criteria. For

15 example, if a European consumer previously indicated that she

16 wants a European or Mediterranean beach vacation and selects the

17 category of 'destination' 166a, preferably twelve criteria are

18 presented to the consumer; for example, 'sun, sea and sand',

19 'peace and quiet', 'active', 'places to explore', 'dramatic

20 scenery', 'away from it all', 'romantic', 'lively', 'old world',

21 'new world', 'holiday location', and 'cultural location'. The

22 consumer may select at 176 none, one, or more (up to all twelve)

23 of the criteria (by marking check boxes) which best reflect how

24 they want to experience their vacation. The selected criteria are

25 added to a postcard' file, which is described in more detail

- 13 -

1 below. In addition, several questions (or options) are presented

2 at 178 to the consumer regarding the mode of travel (air, water,

3 land) 180, the distance willing to travel (in travel time) 182,

4 and the weather of the destination (temperature and/or rainfall)

5 184. The responses to these questions at 186 also constitute

6 criteria and are stored.

7

8 By way of another example, if another European consumer

9 previously indicated that he wants a far away beach vacation and

10 is traveling without children, the selection of the 'destination'

11 category will bring up criteria which may differ from the example

12 above; for example, 'adventurous' 172b (Fig. 7) replaces 'places

13 to explore' 172a (Fig. 6).

14

15 Referring back to Fig. 2C, after the consumer makes his or

16 her criteria selections in each category in which he or she

17 desires to provide a criteria selection, the system preferably

18 displays at 187 to the user the number of vacation

19 destinations/accommodations remaining in the system that meet the

20 selected criteria.

21

22 The consumer may then select criteria from one of the

23 remaining categories shown in Fig. 5. Turning now to Fig. 8, if

24 the category of 'local area' 166b is chosen next, exemplar

25 criteria 188 for selection by the consumer may include: 'on the

1 strip', 'out of town', 'scenic views', 'seclusion', 'modern',

2 'heritage', 'passion for food', 'glamorous', 'night life',

3 'restaurants', 'street cafes', 'local markets'.

4

5 The consumer then selects criteria from another category.

6 For example, referring to Fig. 9, with respect to 'accommodation',

7 exemplar criteria 190 include: 'hotel', 'resort', 'apartment',

8 'villa', 'luxury', 'standard', 'basic', 'modern', 'traditional',

9 'classic property', 'onsite entertainment', 'gym', 'swimming

10 pool', 'distance to beach', 'food options', and 'number of rooms'.

11 With respect to 'distance to beach', 'food options', and 'number

12 of rooms', options may be selected from a drop down list.

13 Criteria are selected, and the associated images are added to the

14 image postcard. Referring to Fig. 10, with respect to the

15 category of 'important for kids', exemplar criteria 192 include:

16 'playmates', 'games', 'kids clubs', 'children's pool', 'baby

17 sitting', 'high chairs/cots', 'children's menus', 'safe disco',

18 'safe beach', 'play area', '4-5 bedrooms', and 'adjoining rooms'.

19 Referring to Fig. 11, with respect to the category of

20 'activities', exemplar criteria 194 include: 'restaurants',

21 'family eating out', 'shopping', 'street cafes', 'being pampered',

22 'romantic evenings', 'clubbing', 'bike/car hire', 'beauty spots',

23 'historic places', 'museums'. Referring to Fig. 12, with respect

24 to the category of 'individual needs', exemplar criteria 196

25 include: 'vegetarian meals', 'wheelchair access', 'lift' (or

- 15 -

1 elevator), 'no dogs', 'pets allowed'. The criteria in each

2 category are reviewed by the consumer and desirable criteria are

3 selected. In addition, while not shown, the consumer may add his

4 or her own criteria. The selected criteria and the associated

5 image files are stored in the postcard file.

6

7 After the consumer has completed review of the categories and

8 made his or her selection of desired criteria, the consumer is

9 presented at 198 with a preliminary postcard file 200, as shown in

10 Fig. 13. The preliminary postcard file 200 is a two-dimensional

11 array of the selected criteria and images associated with the

12 selected criteria. If the consumer has selected more criteria

13 than a set maximum number, e.g., fifteen criteria, the consumer is

14 preferably requested at 202 (Fig. 2C), 204 (Fig. 13) to select

15 which criteria to 'keep' and which criteria to 'drop' to bring the

16 number within the maximum number. When required, the consumer

17 indicates which criteria to 'keep' or 'drop' by selection of

18 'keep' 206 and 'drop' 208 from a drop down list 210 associated

19 with each criteria. 'Dropped' criteria are nevertheless

20 preferably taken into account in evaluating vacation destination

21 recommendations for a consumer. Alternatively, three options may

22 be provided: 'keep', 'drop', and 'remember', in which 'dropped'

23 criteria are not later taken in to account, and 'remembered'

24 criteria are taken into account but given lesser weight than

25 'kept' criteria.

- 16 -

1   Referring to Figs. 2D and 14, once the consumer has reduced

2   at 212 the number of criteria to within the maximum number, the

3   consumer is presented with an updated preliminary postcard file

4   214 at 216. The consumer is then preferably requested, at 216

5   (Fig. 2D) and 218 (Fig. 218), to prioritize the remaining criteria

6   by ranking the several, e.g., five, most important criteria to the

7   consumer. The consumer ranks at 220 the most important criteria

8   preferably with a pull down list 222 under each of the remaining

9   criteria. This operates to weight the ranked criteria more

10   heavily in the selection process, but preferably does not operate

11   to eliminate the other criteria in the updated preliminary

12   postcard file as factors in the selection process.

13

14   After the criteria have been ranked by the consumer, the

15   system makes a determination of which vacation destinations most

16   meet the needs of the consumer. This is done by comparing the

17   attributes of the vacation destination in the system with the

18   criteria of the consumer taking into account the consumer's

19   weighted ranking of the most important criteria. In addition,

20   referring to Figs. 2D and 15, a final postcard file 228 is

21   prepared and displayed at 230 for the consumer. The final

22   postcard file 228 includes the criteria names and associated image

23   files for the 'kept' criteria 232, with the top-ranked criteria

24   232a displayed most prominently, e.g., across the top of the

25   postcard. In addition, the final postcard file includes the

1 consumer's responses 234, 236 to the initial questions of "How do

2 you want to feel on your vacation?" and "What do you want your

3 overwhelming memory to be?"; i.e., the responses stored at 146,

4 160. In addition, the postcard file includes a link (or

5 hyperlink) 238 to a display of the recommended vacation

6 destinations (which can be selected at 240), a link 242 to a list

7 of the reasons for the recommendations (which can be selected at

8 244), and a link 246 to side-by-side comparisons of the

9 recommendations (which can be selected at 248).

10

11 If the consumer selects the link 238 to the display of the

12 recommended vacation destinations, a display 250 such as shown in

13 Fig. 16 is provided at 252 to the consumer. The display 250

14 preferably includes for each vacation destination 253a, 253b, a

15 photograph 254, a map 256, basic information on the locale 258,

16 the weather 260, a URL (uniform resource locator) hyperlink to

17 more information 262, recommended accommodations 264, prices 266,

18 access 268, and availability 270.

19

20 If the consumer selects the link to the list of the reasons

21 for the recommendations, a worksheet 272 such as shown in Fig. 17

22 is provided at 273 to the consumer. The worksheet 272 indicates

23 the choices made with respect to the 'destination' 274, 'local

24 area' 276, and 'accommodation' categories 278. The worksheet

25 displays the number of destinations remaining 280 after each

- 18 -

1 criteria selection by the consumer. The consumer is able to edit,

2 via selection of 'edit' buttons 282 and 'on/off' buttons 284 the

3 reasons and see how such changes affect the recommendations. For

4 example, Fig. 18, the worksheet 272 indicates that by changing

5 various criteria (permitting greater rainfall at 286 and not

6 limiting the accommodation to a resort at 288) additional

7 recommendations 290 for a vacation destination are made by the

8 system. Throughout the interactive selection process the number

9 of possible options which satisfy the selection criteria are shown

10 thereby ensuring the consumer can see the number of remaining

11 options.

12

13   Fig. 19 displays the side-by-side comparisons 292 of the

14 recommendations, permitting the consumer to analyze in detail

15 various details of the recommendation (e.g., size of the

16 accommodations, full board options, distance to beach, number of

17 swimming pools, restaurants and bars, whether the accommodations

18 have a fitness center, sauna, casino, or golf course, etc.) to

19 facilitate making a final choice. Finally, the consumer may

20 select one of the recommended vacation packages for purchase. To

21 facilitate the purchase, a referral link may be provided to an

22 online ticket and hotel booking service, a phone number for a

23 travel agency may be provided, or the front and back end modules

24 may include the necessary forms and data, which are known in the

25 art, to complete the transaction.

1   By providing basic information on the travelers, and general

2   information on how far the travelers are willing to travel, the

3   preferred weather conditions, a budget range, and the selection of

4   criteria from one or more categories, the system 10 is capable of

5   determining a suitable vacation destination, even without being

6   provided information as to where the consumer wants to travel.

7

8   There has been described and illustrated herein an embodiment

9   of an interactive system for the selection of a vacation

10 destination and a method of selecting a vacation destination.

11 While a particular embodiments of the invention has been

12 described, it is not intended that the invention be limited

13 thereto, as it is intended that the invention be as broad in scope

14 as the art will allow and that the specification be read likewise.

15 Thus, while the consumer is presented with a number of categories

16 from which to choose criteria, the consumer does not need to

17 review the criteria in all the categories; an appropriate

18 selection of a vacation destination may nevertheless be made by

19 the system, provided that criteria in a non-reviewed category are

20 not essential to the consumer's enjoyment of the vacation. In

21 addition, while particular criteria have been disclosed for use

22 within the various categories, it will be appreciated that other

23 categories, e.g., sports available, and other criteria within the

24 disclosed categories may be used as well. Furthermore, while the

25 vacation destination selection system is preferably implemented

1　with a global computer network, it will be appreciated that the

2　system may also be implemented in another interactive medium, for

3　example, an in-travel agency kiosk, portable digital media, e.g.,

4　CD-ROMs and DVDs, or via interactive television, such that a

5　stand-alone (non-networked) computer system or television is

6　utilized to implement the system. Moreover, while a front end

7　module and back end module are discussed as distinct databases, it

8　will be appreciated that the modules may operate as portions of a

9　common database. In addition, while two preferred focus questions

10　are disclosed for preferable presentation to the consumer, other

11　or additional questions may be used. Moreover, while the focus

12　questions are intended to aid in consumer selection of criteria as

13　well as be displayed on the postcard, it will be appreciated that

14　a natural language parser may be used to incorporate the response

15　into the vacation destination selection process. Also, while the

16　front end is preferably implemented in a series of HTML files, it

17　will be appreciated that other file types (e.g., VRML, JAVA

18　applets, etc.) may also be used to implement the front end. It

19　will therefore be appreciated by those skilled in the art that yet

20　other modifications could be made to the provided invention

21　without deviating from its spirit and scope as claimed.